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War Takes (Tomas de Guerra). Adelaida Trujillo and Patricia Castaño (Colombia and England: Faction Films, 2002; Distributed in the U.S. by Women Make Movies, 2003).

The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt. Victoria Bruce and Karin Hayes (Maryland: Urcunina Films; Distributed in the U.S. by Women Make Movies, 2003).

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Long years of bloodshed have marred Colombian society. Since the early 1960s, two major guerrilla groups--the FARC and the ELN-- have fought for land redistribution and socialist government in the country. At least, that is what these peasant guerrilla armies have represented historically. Today, many non-combatant Colombians distrust the political and moral ethos of the guerrillas. In the early 1980s, right-wing paramilitary forces joined the conflict between the guerrillas and the government. Paramilitary leaders-- some of whom are under extradition orders to the U.S. to face drug trafficking charges--claim that the state does not, and cannot, defend their interests effectively. These right-wing death squads proclaim themselves to be "self-defense forces" that protect Colombians who are harassed by Marxist revolutionary guerrillas. The Colombian government stands accused of covert involvement with the paramilitaries, futile attempts to negotiate with or quash guerrilla forces, and an almost total failure to protect non-combatants in the country. The three sides of the Colombian conflict--the state, guerrillas, and paramilitaries--have each vowed the extinction of their enemies, some of whom overlap in this internecine war. Occasional bouts of peace have interrupted the forty-year flow of blood. Yet, for many observers of the civil war, the guerrilla ideologies, right-wing massacres, and failed peace talks are nuances of the larger scaffolding of the conflict and prospects for peace in Colombia: the illicit and all-encompassing drug economy.

Two recent documentary films ask us to consider questions about the Colombian civil war that might, too easily, fit within the schema of the drug wars. These filmmakers demand that we also see how the war has entered center stage for every Colombian, roughening the texture of life itself. The personal, social, and political effects of the Colombian civil war are pursued in the films, "The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt," by Victoria Bruce and Karin Hayes (2003), and "War Takes," by Adelaida Trujillo and Patricia Castaño (2002). The films direct our attention to the oft-unpublicized victims of the war: the kidnapped, the internally displaced, and the non-combatants who experience the conflict as a daily and domestic concern.

The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt

On Saturday, November 20, 2004, Ingrid Betancourt and Clara Rojas spent their 1,000th day as prisoners of the FARC guerrillas. The recent documentary, "The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt," details the sudden disappearance of the presidential candidate on February 23, 2002. The filmmakers, Victoria Bruce and Karin Hayes, had traveled to Colombia in early 2002 to film the presidential campaign of the Oxygen Green Party candidate (*Partido Oxígeno Verde*), Betancourt. A few weeks into filming, FARC guerrillas kidnapped Betancourt and her campaign manager, Rojas, as they traveled into FARC territory. The sudden turn of events transformed a documentary about an independent politician turned anti-corruption crusader into the tale of a vanishing act. The film asks us to consider what happens to a political campaign when its candidate disappears. In a country where kidnappings are a plague affecting 3,000 people per year, Betancourt's case is not uncommon. She is, however, an unprecedented victim because never before has a presidential candidate been taken hostage by one of the leftist guerrilla groups in Colombia.

"The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt" begins by tracing the early efforts of a small, independent political movement to present an alternative path to the Liberal and Conservative party machines that have ruled Colombia since the nineteenth century. With rapidly unfolding events, the filmmakers turned their attention to Betancourt's family and her campaign staff as they dealt with the emotional and political effects of her kidnap.

The dramatic tension of the film rests upon Betancourt's family: the sorrow and strength of her mother, father, and sister as they reckon with the horror of her unknown fate; the love of her first husband and her two children as they struggle with their mother's disappearance; and her second husband's efforts to maintain her presidential campaign, the party itself, and his own sanity in her absence.

"Kidnapping" is extraordinary because the film captures the immediacy of the events and the depth of emotion around Betancourt's disappearance. However, the rash, brutal act of the kidnap twists the story at times into a journalistic effort, and away from the deeper analysis that a sustained documentary investigation might have provided. Given the pressure of the political moment, the filmmakers rushed to complete the film, forgoing an examination of kidnapping as a political strategy in Colombia, as well as its murkier historical context. The exigencies of the moment demanded, understandably so, that the film be broadcast in a timely manner (at first, on HBO/Cinemax in February 2003). If the filmmakers had had more time to research and present Betancourt's personal and political history, as well as her position within Colombian politics, this would have been a stronger documentary.

The film's focus on personal repercussions results in a thin discussion of the presidential campaign in which Betancourt played a part, albeit in absentia. The film flashes brief images of Liberal candidate Horacio Serpa and the Independent, eventual winner of the election, Álvaro Uribe. Short interviews with a few Colombian journalists and a participant at a political rally do not constitute a sustained reflection about the ramifications of kidnapping or Betancourt's own political significance. The comments that the filmmakers do capture are, indeed, provocative. One reporter at the Liberal newspaper, *El Tiempo*, argues that Betancourt brought her fate upon herself; she knew the risks and now is paying the price of politics in Colombia. Another journalist remarks that, yes, Betancourt's disappearance is very sad, but the situation is so common now as to have become routine.

Exhaustion and resignation typify many Colombian reactions heard on the margins of the film's central focus. Even the snappy, optimistic pace of the film's start cannot alleviate the feeling of grimness with which many in the film seem to face the future. "Kidnapping" opens with images from early 2002, as Betancourt campaigned on Bogotá streets with attention-getting devices, like distributing Viagra to rather sheepish middle-aged male passers-by. As Betancourt placed a small packet of the sexual restorative in the men's hands, she said that Viagra symbolizes Colombians' dissatisfaction with their country's anemic state. She claimed that her presidential administration would invigorate, restore and reform the government, that truth would reign in the halls of congress, and that all Colombians would receive adequate health and educational services. Many shrug off such promises as naïveté or artifice. It is the dilemma of such a feeble state that its politicians, even those most committed to reform, fail to rouse their constituents to vigorous participation in government or civil society.

Betancourt's drama is also set on stages outside the Colombian frame, but these stages also exist outside the frame of this documentary. In 2001, Betancourt made a splash in France with her memoir, *La Rage au Coeur*, written in French and subsequently translated into Spanish and English [*La Rabia en el Corazón* (2001) and *Until Death Do Us Part: My struggle to reclaim Colombia* (2002)]. In it, Betancourt lambasted the corruption of the Colombian government and heralded her own efforts at political reform as a Deputy (1994-98) and a senator (1998-2002). Despite her popularity among the European left, especially in France where she holds dual citizenship, Betancourt's position within Colombia is more dubious. Some Colombians have recently expressed their distaste for what they feel was her self-aggrandized portrayal as a vanquishing heroine, a solitary crusader for truth in the Colombian government, and a political outsider who remained pure from the taint of party politics and drug money. These Colombians have chafed at Betancourt's caustic critiques of the government, despite the evidence blasted at them daily of links between narcotraffickers and government officials, from the highest ranks (like former President Ernesto Samper) to the lowest rungs of police officers and foot soldiers. Her critiques rankled because Colombians have faith in their country, their democracy, and their goodness, despite the horrific signs to the contrary. This is not to say that Colombians live in denial, but rather that many resent the accusations from perceived "outsiders"--including Betancourt--that Colombians do not know how to govern themselves.

Betancourt used the David and Goliath drama of her political battle to her own advantage before her disappearance and now a small band of supporters is trying to bear that standard. She was adroit in cultivating support for her cause in Europe with her charisma, intelligence, and connections. The members of this network--including Betancourt's French diplomat ex-husband, Fabrice, along with her former tutor, who is a French government minister, and her advertising executive husband, Juan Carlos--are working hard to promote the cause of her liberation in Europe. In Colombia, the effort has stagnated for many reasons, including the strident U.S. government opposition to a prisoner exchange proposed by the FARC and seconded by President Álvaro Uribe this August and September.

Colombians understand that the trauma of kidnapping affects families, friends, and society as whole, and they lament its epidemic scope. But many still argue that a relatively minor politician like Betancourt ran even greater risks in heralding a "Colombia Nueva" by proposing to eradicate traditional politics and the influence of drug money there; now, they say, she is simply paying the price for her politics. This is the crux of the dilemma: In what truly democratic system should elected officials expect to 'pay a price' for their politics with their lives?

Colombians face a perverted reality: an acute kidnapping and murder rate, billions of dollars spent trying to recover victims through ransom or government surveillance and military action; and yet thousands of Colombians continue to languish in guerrilla prisons and hundreds die every day in massacres by paramilitaries and guerrilla forces alike.

Ingrid Betancourt and her campaign manager, Clara Rojas, have been held for two years. The guerrillas have also imprisoned dozens of other politicians, along with soldiers, policemen, poor farmers, small town mayors, councilors, labor union leaders, journalists, lawyers, businesspeople, human rights activists, and family members of all these people. Betancourt is a cause célèbre in France and one hopes that the international campaign for her liberation will achieve her release immediately. But many Colombians wonder what will become of the others who cannot claim such powerful connections. And what of those who remain at home in the empty space their loved ones inhabited?

War Takes

The Colombian filmmakers Adelaida Trujillo and Patricia Castaño have created an extraordinary personal view into the psychological effects of the Colombian civil war in "War Takes" (2002). The narrator, Adelaida, tells the viewers that this is really a diary of four years in the lives of the two women, their families, and their work as television and film producers in Bogotá. They are veteran filmmakers of such notable documentaries as "Law of the Jungle" (1989), in which they studied the farmers and guerrillas living in the remote coca-growing areas of the Caguán River and La Macarena in the Colombian Amazon basin. In "War Takes," Trujillo and Castaño returned to the Caguán to investigate the politics of the demilitarized zone (*zona de distensión*) that the Colombian government created in 1999 as an initial step in the peace negotiations with the FARC. The film opens with the shocking news that then President Andrés Pastrana had revoked the 16,000 square mile DMZ in February of 2002. Adelaida's husband tells his young son, "El tiempo se dañó" ("Time's up."). Would the crumbling peace talks finally shatter the relatively sheltered peace of the urban denizens of Colombia, the upper- and middle-classes who have managed to keep the war at bay for so many years? Trujillo and Castaño pursue this question by tracking backwards in time to the year 1998, when they began recording their views and experiences as filmmakers recording the effects of war in their country.

Several narratives intertwine in the film: the producers introduce themselves and their immediate relations--husbands and children--and then present their work colleagues, especially their assistant producer, Colbert García, who works with "Comunidades de Paz" (Peace Communities) in Urabá, northern Colombia. These beleaguered communities are villages repopulated by people who have been displaced internally by the war. The members of these communities have declared themselves to be neutral and every day must struggle to remain safe from attacks by both the leftist guerrillas and the right-wing paramilitary death squads.

But the women are the real heart of this film. Castaño and Trujillo turned the camera upon themselves to find out what happened to their country in recent years, and to see what had changed in their own perceptions of the war, their role in society, and their hopes for the future of the country. As longtime media producers, Castaño and Trujillo are confident as they wield and speak to the camera. The hardest and most touching moments in the film come when they turn the lens upon their family members. Sometimes their children and husbands are goofy, witty, and awkward; at other times, they are angry and resentful; but in all these moments, they are honest. It is difficult to face the blank eye of the camera, and yet these women coax their interviewees and themselves into great depths of expression.

"War Takes" offers an intimate view, both remarkable and harsh. The viewer learns about the perspective of the Colombian upper classes, living with fears of personal attack, kidnapping, and assassination. These women, like many urban Colombians, live in fortified houses and apartment complexes guarded by trained dogs and armed private security officers. They learn that their children's schools are preparing them for a day when they might have to sleep in the school for a night, or many, if the worst were to happen: schoolchildren taken hostage by one of the combatant groups in the country. They learn that the guerrillas have declared all Colombian mayors targets for assassination; the mayor of Bogotá is one of their neighbors. Preparations for how to deal with a bomb blast become domestic discussion, as ordinary as a fire drill, or so it would now seem. Certain images in the film haunt this viewer, at least, after years lived in Bogotá: a car's windows riddled with bullet holes, parked in the garage of Castaño's apartment building where five people recently have been kidnapped. The nearness of death, the proximity of vanishing--this is a world turned inside out to reveal the bloody veins of the war. Even, or especially, children see how death and disappearance wreak their havoc.

Trujillo and Castaño continue their work, developing children's programs for public television and producing a human rights documentary series. They get up in the morning, juice oranges, eat toast, read the paper, talk--

sometimes argue--with their husbands about politics, and they go to work. They work hard in many venues, both in the media and charitable organizations. Their views and personal experiences differ, but Trujillo and Castaño share much during the course of long days together in the office and in the field.

Their fieldwork is the boon and the weakness of "War Takes." This viewer wished for a wider lens, a bigger view of the humanitarian crisis that they discuss in the film. From herbicidal fumigation in southern Colombian coca-growing regions to the peace communities' struggles in the north, we are toured quickly through the highlights--or hotspots--of the Colombian human rights scenario. But many images and ideas seemed tacked on, not haphazardly, but without the focused thoughtfulness of the intimate scenes from their own family's lives. For example, we are presented a provocative scene in which a young boy from an extremely poor barrio of Bogotá (apparently Ciudad Bolívar, from the time that I have spent there) begins to tell his life story. But this is a clip from their award-winning children's television program and the film cuts away abruptly to another section about their television programming for such young people. Given their commitment to the education of Colombian youth, to securing a better future for them, I wondered why children are not featured more prominently, if not as the central focus of this film. The admirable work of their television studio reaches many young children across the country. Many children explore their own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions through the television programs that Castaño and Trujillo produce. But this filmic diary lacks the intensity of the voice of Colombian children, as they survive poverty, displacement, death, and destruction by creating art and reports on their lives.

"War Takes" is a wonderful film. Trujillo and Castaño share how they feel living as prisoners in the claustrophobic world of the Colombian war. Some Colombians, including their own family members, have chosen to leave the country--a constrained decision, made with much regret about departing a beloved land. An old joke circulates, reflecting Colombians' dark humor: "The last one to leave Colombia, turn out the lights." Other Colombians have been forced to flee their homes after massacres and death threats. Desperation, frustration, pain, and hopelessness are the texture of this film and life in Colombia. But we also marvel at the passion of Colombians committed in the present to the work of securing the future: education, social services, political change, and human rights. Pride, love, and hope also play starring roles in this film.

Both documentaries, "The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt" and "War Takes," privilege the perspective of the Colombian upper classes. The United Nations considers over half of the Colombian population to be poor. With such a wide income distribution gap, the women represented in these two films are the well-off minority. This is not to say that they are "comfortably" wealthy, since to have money in Colombia is to live in danger of kidnap, extortion, and assassination. However, threats to individual and familial security are not confined to the wealthy alone. I wish that these films had spent more time discussing the rural, at least non-Bogotá, stories of the armed conflict in Colombia. The field research sections of "War Takes" were especially appreciated, but one wonders what the residents of other regions, even cities like Medellín, Popayán, and Cartagena, think of their lives and the situation of the country. Yes, that would be a project that far outstripped the resources of either of these small production companies. Money, especially in Colombia, is tight.

These two documentaries have done much to advance understanding of the complexity of Colombian politics and society today. I hope to see many more such efforts produced and brought to international audiences, especially in the United States, where many citizens are unaware of the extent of the military aid that their government has granted to the Colombian government. Since 2000, the U.S. government's "Plan Colombia" has granted 500 to 700 million dollars every year to the Colombian war on coca production and trafficking. Congressional stipulations prohibit that money from diversion into counterinsurgency efforts, but many observers within and outside Colombia claim with increasing anxiety that the legal bar is being hurdled by hardliners in both governments. Without a doubt, the war in Colombia has intensified since Álvaro Uribe took office in August of 2002. Uribe won the presidency in a landslide with 53% of the vote in an unprecedented first-round victory. Uribe ran as an independent, with a talk-tough campaign that promised "democratic security" for Colombians. Uribe supports Plan Colombia because he claims that "illegal drugs fund terrorism" and he argues that, under his administration, kidnapping rates have dropped, especially for right-wing targets like labor union leaders. Uribe's victory signaled the extent to which Colombians of all political stripes had rejected political negotiations for peace and had moved toward military solutions to the conflict. The lingering question that these filmmakers pose is to wonder when, and indeed how, civil society will engage in a political resolution to the war. As the tragedy unfolds, the answer, for now at least, appears to be in the hands of the many militaries involved.

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